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SUBJECT: (C) NEW ICM LEADERS STRIVE FOR MAINSTREAM

REF: A. KUWAIT 00810

[B](#). KUWAIT 00958

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Frank C. Urbancic, reason 1.4(b,d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: Prompted in part by its poor performance in the July National Assembly elections, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), which claims to be the largest Islamic political group in Kuwait, undertook a massive reorganization recently, including the establishment of an elected General Assembly, a drastic change in top leadership, and the articulation of a new broad-based political agenda. The ICM's new younger leaders eagerly portray the organization as moderate, progressive, and reform-minded, aimed at political, economic, educational, and social development. The party's new Secretary General in particular, Bader Al-Nashi, presents himself as a pragmatic, forward-looking leader who seeks to broaden the party's political and social base and forge consensus on key issues through active outreach and dialogue with other political groups across the ideological spectrum. Although ICM leaders are still short on reform specifics and much of the ICM's ideology remains that of the Muslim Brotherhood (e.g., vehemently anti-Israel, supports the Islamization of all laws), a revitalized ICM may have a moderating effect on the Islamist movement in Kuwait and might encourage more hardline Islamists to soften their stance on controversial issues such as women's voting rights and educational reform. This is not guaranteed, however, and the movement bears close watching. END SUMMARY.

(U) THE ICM AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

2.(C) The ICM was established after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as an independent, uniquely Kuwaiti political movement separate from the Muslim Brotherhood (Jamiat Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimun), by Muslim Brothers disillusioned by the Brotherhood's support for Iraq. (Note: The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan Al-Banna and has branches today in roughly 70 countries. End Note). The ICM continues to uphold much of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology even though it has tailored its political approach and agenda to fit the local Kuwaiti context. MP Dr. Mohammed Al-Busairi, ICM's Director of Parliamentary Affairs, told Poloff that the ICM typically upholds the Muslim Brotherhood's position on most "pan-Arab" issues but disagrees significantly on other matters, notably the war in Iraq. The ICM, he said, like the GOK, strongly supports U.S. military and other efforts to ensure a stable, secure, and prosperous Iraq. The ICM, like the Ikhwan, also supports the Islamization of Kuwait's laws, rejects overtly Western social influences, and opposes the secularization of Kuwaiti institutions. (Note: In 2003, the UN listed a Kuwait-based NGO, Lajnat Al-Daawa Al-Islamiyya, loosely affiliated with the ICM, as a terrorist-supporting organization and some 1.4 million KD or over \$4.5 million of the NGO's assets have been frozen to date. The ICM has vehemently denied any involvement, even remotely through any of its subsidiary organizations, in terrorist financing activities -- ref B. End Note).

(U) REORGANIZATION MORE THAN JUST A FACELIFT

3.(SBU) The ICM ran in 15 electoral districts during the July 2003 National Assembly elections but only won 2 seats compared to 5 seats in the 1999 Parliament. MP Dr. Nasser Al-Sane, the new ICM Assistant Secretary General and Director of Development Programs, attributes the ICM's poor showing to a lack of coordination and consensus with other Islamist groups, particularly Salafis, on important issues.

4.(C) Prompted in part by its poor electoral showing in 2003, the ICM held elections for the establishment of a new 50-member General Assembly in January as part of a widespread political and structural reorganization. Dr. Al-Busairi told Poloff that the reorganization also reflected a pragmatic re-evaluation of internal and external developments, and that the ICM typically re-assesses its position and agenda every few years in response to changing circumstances. Many of the ICM's new leaders and General Assembly members are younger (relative to past leadership) and, according to Bader Al-Nashi, the new 44-year-old Secretary General, were

previously active in the National Union of Kuwaiti Students and thus have a strong following among Kuwaiti youth. Al-Nashi described the ICM's newly elected General Assembly as the "link between the past and present generations of the movement" necessary "to reform and achieve the development goals of the ICM." In addition to Secretary General, Assistant Secretary General, and Director of Parliamentary Affairs, other elected ICM positions, some of them new, include a Director of Political Affairs, Director of Cultural and Intellectual Debate, Director of Information, and Director of Electoral Constituencies.

5.(C) The ICM presents itself, at least outwardly in terms of its rhetoric and the personalities of its leaders, as a moderate, progressive organization willing to engage with the U.S. on major issues. Secretary General Al-Nashi acknowledged to Poloffs in a meeting on March 28 that Kuwait could learn from the development experiences of the U.S. and other Western countries, and that if the U.S. supports genuine political and economic reforms in Kuwait, he sees "no problem" in cooperating with the U.S. to promote them. The ICM decision to boycott an April 13 meeting at the National Assembly organized by the Scientific Salafis to inaugurate the establishment of a new "Popular Parliamentary Committee to Support the Iraqi People" in light of the U.S.-led "genocide" offensive "against women, children, and the elderly in Fallujah" lends some credibility to its stated commitment to tolerance and moderation in politics. It also reflects a realpolitik understanding that those we are fighting in Fallujah include Saddam loyalists hostile to Islamists. Dr. Al-Busairi told Poloff April 14 that he had met personally with MP Dr. Waleed Al-Tabtabaei, one of the Scientific Salafi organizers of the committee meeting and an author of the subsequently issued anti-U.S. statement, to express ICM dissatisfaction with the Scientific Salafi approach. Dr. Al-Busairi acknowledged that events in Iraq are much more "complicated" than the Scientific Salafi view, and that the escalating attacks against coalition forces and civilians in Iraq do not appear to be those of any concerted Iraqi resistance but rather those of extremist "outside" elements seeking to undermine Iraqi stability.

(U) THE ICM'S NEW "REFORM" AGENDA

6.(C) The ICM appears to be focusing on broadening its political and social base through active outreach in electoral districts, particularly in outlying tribal areas, to spread its message and attract more supporters, particularly among Kuwaiti youth. According to Secretary General Al-Nashi, the ICM has also initiated regular, active dialogue with other political groups, including Salafis, Shi'a, independent Islamists, and liberals, to share ideas and forge consensus on the key development issues facing Kuwait today. MP Dr. Nasser Al-Sane participated in January in a debate on electoral reform sponsored by the Kuwait Economic Society, a leading liberal NGO. He said ICM cooperation with such liberal groups would have been "unthinkable" even just a few years ago. ICM leaders consistently portray the organization as a "middle-of-the-road" Islamist political grouping that eschews violence and extremism, supports broad-based dialogue, and advocates for political, social, economic, and educational reform consistent with Kuwait's Islamic identity. Dr. Al-Nashi characterizes the ICM as the Islamist party of "moderation" and "reform," distinct from the Salafis and other Islamist movements.

7.(C) According to Dr. Al-Nashi and Dr. Al-Sane, the main areas of ICM focus are as follows:

--Broadening political participation to include women's voting rights, a reduction in the voting age, and legalization of political parties;

--Educational reform, including upgrading of educational technology and curriculum, adopting international best practices and the latest teaching methodologies, and making education more relevant to the needs of the private sector;

--Improving the transparency and accountability of government, with an emphasis on "e-government" and reducing waste and corruption;

--Economic reform, development, and job creation for Kuwaitis; and

--Protecting and strengthening Kuwait's Islamic heritage, identity, culture, and traditions, including through the Islamization of laws.

8.(C) On the issue of women's political rights, ICM leaders argue that the organization voted against the 1999 draft bill granting women full political rights for practical reasons rather than due to a religious conviction against female suffrage (i.e., that the GOK did not articulate a clear,

well-developed model governing how female suffrage would be implemented in practice). Dr. Al-Nashi told Poloffs recently that he believes Kuwaiti society is now "ready" for women's enfranchisement but clarified that the ICM supports women's voting rights but not women's right to run for election to the National Assembly. (Note: Even the hardline Scientific Salafi MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaei has stated publicly that he might "consider" women's voting rights. However, Scientific Salafis vehemently oppose women's right to run for public office as they believe Shari'a prohibits women from exercising sovereign authority, or "wilaya aama," over men. End Note). The ICM's new stance on women's voting rights might reflect external pressure. Earlier in the year, Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood spokesmen urged the ICM publicly to support female suffrage in Kuwait in order to conform to regional and international developments. The ICM's position may also simply reflect a pragmatic acceptance of the need for greater political openness and the realization that the ICM could benefit politically from a more broad-based electorate that includes women, particularly Islamist women who are increasingly active in civil society. The Social Reform Society, an NGO under the ICM umbrella, has an active and influential women's branch.

(U) HOW INFLUENTIAL IS THE ICM?

9.(C) ICM leaders acknowledge that gaining social and political support for the ICM's ambitious reform agenda, especially female suffrage, educational reform, and tolerance and moderation in politics, will be difficult. Dr. Al-Nashi believes that a major challenge for the ICM will be to encourage tribal oppositionists in particular, who oppose women's political rights for social and cultural reasons, to support it. ICM leaders argue that tribal opposition to female suffrage is stronger than religious opposition as women's enfranchisement directly contradicts traditional, tribal, patriarchal social values that are deeply entrenched and difficult to overcome. ICM leaders have also told us repeatedly that the continued violence in Israel-Palestine, particularly the recent Israeli assassination of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, makes the ICM's message of moderation and tolerance difficult to spread even in Kuwait, particularly among youth. Dr. Al-Nashi told Poloffs recently that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, escalating violence in Iraq, and a sense of Arab powerlessness and political impotence, fuel extremist tendencies and reduce incentives for dialogue and compromise.

10.(C) Dr. Al-Busairi, who is also Chairman of the National Assembly's Education, Culture, and Guidance Committee, told Poloff that the ICM actively engages in dialogue with Kuwaiti youth in high schools and universities, and encourages young people to be "open and tolerant" toward other views and opinions because other opinions "may be right." He stressed that, since the early 1980s, ICM-affiliated student candidates have consistently won elections to lead Kuwait University's Student Union, and that Shi'a, independent Islamist, and other students are often involved in union activities because of the tolerance and open-mindedness of its leaders. ICM leaders believe educational reform, including curriculum reform, is an urgent development need (but must not be dictated by the West). Dr. Al-Busairi stressed that Kuwaiti youth at a very young age must be exposed to values of tolerance, dialogue, openness, and moderation in schools and in the community in order to combat extremism. The ICM has opposed the recent GOK proposal to merge/subsume Kuwait University's (currently independent) Faculty of Shari'a within the Faculty of Law, arguing that the absence of an independent Faculty of Shari'a, whose curriculum and ideology are approved (and can be controlled) by the Ministry of Education, will only encourage Sunni Islamist students to seek and obtain (more radical) clerical education and training in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

11.(C) COMMENT: Despite its stated commitment to moderation in politics and vehement public rejection of violence and extremism, the ICM remains closely affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, is still virulently opposed to Israel's right to exist, and a subsidiary NGO was recently designated as a terrorist-supporting organization. Nevertheless, the ICM's support for women's voting rights and for US-led efforts in Iraq mark it as the most moderate of the three main Sunni Islamist political movements in Kuwait. But then, it occupies that position almost by definition: the other two are the Salafis and their more radical offshoot, the Scientific Salafis. We believe most Kuwaitis, even Islamists, oppose violence and extremism, and favor moderation and stability in politics. The weak turnout at the Scientific Salafi-sponsored meeting to condemn U.S. "genocide" against Sunni Muslims in Fallujah (only about 20 people) suggests that most Kuwaitis are not ready or inclined to embrace a radical perspective. A revitalized ICM that is able to attract the support and votes of mainstream, middle-of-the-road Kuwaitis through its pragmatic, reform-oriented approach may have a moderating effect on the Kuwaiti Islamist movement and help to

marginalize radical elements, but this is not a sure bet. All three strains of political Islam in Kuwait bear close watching.
URBANCIC